

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi- Child Labor (article 1 of 2)

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Works Cited

Schanberg, Sydney H.Dorigny, Marie. "Six Cents An Hour." *Life* 19.7 (1996): 38. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 13 Aug. 2013.

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Section:

JOURNEY

SIX CENTS AN HOUR

ON THE PLAYGROUNDS OF AMERICA, EVERY KID'S GOAL IS TO SCORE. IN PAKISTAN, WHERE CHILDREN STITCH SOCCER BALLS FOR SIX CENTS AN HOUR THE GOAL IS TO SURVIVE.

As our jeep approaches the roadside shed in Mahotra, a village in northern Pakistan, I can see a dozen children and men stitching hexagonal leather pieces into Nike soccer balls. Twelve-year-old Tariq squats in front, having come out of the dank interior for air. At his feet are several white balls with the distinctive Nike swoosh that will soon be finding their way to stores and playing fields in the United States.

My guide, Sadiq, a gutsy Pakistani human rights worker, suggests I not announce my true profession and pose instead as an American interested in setting up shop in Pakistan to make soccer balls for export. It isn't honest--but it's safer. In recent months, Western journalists have been threatened and assaulted for reporting on child labor in this still-feudal society, particularly in those industries where legions of small children toil for 60 cents a day to make products for export to the U.S. and other developed countries. Sadiq himself had been beaten not long ago by toughs hired by soccer ball factory owners.

Afzal Butt, the 19-year-old foreman whose brother owns this village factory, quickly warms to the smell of business. "I can get you as many as 100 stitchers if you need them," he says. "Of course, you'll have to pay off their peshgi to claim them."

He is referring to the money each of the workers owes his brother--\$150 to \$180--a debt incurred when they were bought from their parents, or later on from another owner, which bonds them to their master. By law, peshgi is banned in Pakistan, but the practice remains as common as the

flies that swarm about the faces of workers. The masters call it an advance against wages, but few workers are ever able to retire the debt, child workers least of all because they are paid even less than adults.

This is the key to understanding the pervasiveness of child labor in the third world. Everywhere I went, first in Pakistan, then in India, I was told by the masters that children have agile hands and nimble fingers that make them specially gifted at certain tasks, such as weaving hand-loomed carpets and stitching soccer balls. But if children are so gifted, why pay them less per soccer ball than adults? And less per carpet? No, the answer is that children are sought after, and bonded, and sometimes taken in outright slavery, because they do not cost as much.

As I traveled, I witnessed conditions more appalling than those in the stitching sheds of Mahotra--children as young as six bought from their parents for as little as \$15, sold and resold like furniture, branded, beaten, blinded as punishment for wanting to go home, rendered speechless by the trauma of their enslavement. One 12-year-old Pakistani, Kramat, who had been making bricks since he was sold by his achingly poor father six years ago, his teeth now rotting, his hair tinged with red streaks, a sign of malnutrition, said morosely: "Because I cannot pay back the peshgi, I cannot go anywhere. I am a prisoner."

Such are the unfair accidents of birth. Most children of the developed world are granted protection, schooling and play--including playing soccer on green, carefree fields--while in the world of poverty, children are bonded and denied school and compelled to spend their days in dreary sheds making soccer balls for those better-off.

I could have gone almost anywhere in the third world for this story--to China or Brazil or Thailand or Central America. Human rights experts estimate that, worldwide, 200 million children under 14 (the minimum age set by the International Labor Organization) are working full-time and not going to school. Most of these children produce goods for local consumption, but in the new global economy a swelling number are making products for multinational corporations to export to countries of affluence. Journalists and labor officials have documented the presence of children under 14 in factories in Honduras that make garments for popular U.S. labels and retail chains; in the orange groves of Brazil, where juice is turned into concentrate that is reconstituted on American breakfast tables; in toy factories in China and Thailand; and on assembly lines in Indonesia, where \$100 basketball sneakers are made.

Still, I was drawn to Pakistan and India because between them they account for nearly a third of the underage workers in the world. Drawn, too, because soccer is the world's most popular sport, and Pakistan makes 80 percent of the world's soccer balls. With so many multinational companies--Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Mitre, Umbro, Brine--operating in Pakistan, it seemed a logical place to start. Which is how I came to be in Mahotra.

I tell Afzal Butt I'll consider his offer of bonded workers, but first I need one of the Nike balls for my engineers to test. No problem, he says, selling me one for 200 rupees (roughly \$6). That's what it costs to make a quality soccer ball in Pakistan, in labor and materials, with a profit thrown in--just \$6. In the U.S. these balls sell for \$30 to \$50. More than half the nine million soccer balls imported into the U.S. each year come from Pakistan and all enter the country tariff-free. The words Hand

Made are printed clearly on every ball; not printed is any explanation of whose hands made them.

For the rest of that day in Pakistan, I keep thinking: Someone actually offered to sell me 100 men and children for less than \$200 apiece. In effect, I would have owned them. This thought haunted me throughout my trip and, later, when I talked to soccer industry officials.

"It's an ages-old practice," says Nike spokeswoman Donna Gibbs, acknowledging that her company hasn't implemented its stated goal of eliminating child labor in the production of soccer balls. "And the process of change is going to take time. Too often, well-intentioned human rights groups can cause dramatic negative effects if they scare companies into stopping production and the kids are thrown out on the street."

Pakistan's own Human Rights Commission estimates that 11 million children under 14 work six days a week, nine to 10 hours a day, at grinding, illness-breeding jobs in work sheds, brick factories and sun-grilled fields. They represent a quarter of the country's menial workforce, and their numbers keep rising. Two years ago the median age of children entering the workforce was eight. Now it is seven.

Sialkot, a bustling city of 300,000 about 70 miles from Lahore, is the hub of the nation's soccer ball industry, producing about 35 million balls a year. But the city's clean, well-lit factories are not where the children are. The factories are manned by adults who heat-press logos onto the leather, die-cut the six-sided pieces and make plastic-bag kits of 32 pieces plus an inflatable bladder. Loaded onto trucks, these kits are then farmed out to the villages, where the most crucial part--the stitching--is performed.

Stitching sheds are visible in every hamlet, but at each stop the masters shout at the boys to run when they see foreigners with cameras. And the ragged, barefoot kids, fearing a beating from their masters, dash into the thickets and rice fields beyond. At one compound that resembles a nest of grungy one-car garages, with no lights or ventilation, the soccer masters run shed to shed, yelling at the children to strip off the rubber finger-wraps designed to protect them from vicious thread cuts and to flee for cover. But one child doesn't get out in time. As the masters glare and mutter, I ask him about his work.

"I have a hearing problem, so I cannot speak well," the boy, Kafayat, says in Urdu. His diction belies his story; his words are well-formed. I eventually learn that he is eight, has never been to school and has been stitching in the same shed for three years. He is paid 30 cents for each synthetic leather ball he stitches. The balls carry the brand name Cobra and are stamped FIFA Approved. (FIFA is the international soccer federation.)

At another emptied shed, where Adidas balls are being stitched, we are suddenly surrounded by shouting men. + One protests that an American TV broadcast last year hurt business. Another gang of soccer masters comes up the dusty street, adding to the atmosphere of menace. Their focus is our unflinching guide. "I was in the group that beat you up when you brought foreign journalists around here last year," one growls at Sadiq. We decide to retreat, driving hurriedly out of the village, followed by two men on a motorcycle. They wear white Western-style shirts and sunglasses, trademarks of the Pakistani police, who are routinely bribed by the soccer masters.

They speed past us into Sumbrial, another of Sialkot's stitching satellites.

The soccer ball bush-telegraph system has done its work. The sheds in Sumbrial are empty of children. A few men look after mounds of finished balls. A Toyota pickup truck from one of the factories is collecting giant nylon drawstring bags, 50 balls to a bag. In one shed, Adidas balls are heaped at the back under a sign that reads: "SUBLIME stitching centre. Stitchers under 16 age not allowed."

Sublime is the Sialkot factory that Adidas, the biggest soccer ball manufacturer in Pakistan, has subcontracted with to produce its balls. Amin Javed, chairman of Sublime, cannot be reached for comment, but in the past he has said of child labor: "It is done behind our face....I have no authority to [order] in the villages that the children should not work."

Adidas deals with Sublime through an agent, the Japanese sporting goods company Molten. "We do not own any factories," says John Fread, an Adidas spokesman. "We license our ballmaking through Molten. They in turn do the actual factory-sourcing and production. [It's] all subcontracted out." ("Out" is a popular word with sporting goods companies--as in "subcontracting out," "out-sourcing," even "out-stitching." Translation: "Somebody else hires the children, not us.")

Fread, who says he and other company executives have seen child labor firsthand in Pakistan, echoes a common soccer industry refrain: "Pakistan has a very different culture. We can't just sit back and say whether it's right or wrong."

Industry officials say they have hired a consultant and are working with the Soccer Industry Council of America to address the problem. The effort is still in the embryonic phase, and no money has been committed to any reform measures, such as the creation of schools. But money is available: Nike spends \$280 million a year on advertising, not including the millions it pays athletes who endorse its products.

Over the next few days I come upon children performing all manner of hard and often hazardous work--making bricks, grinding surgical instruments, repairing roads and cleaning cowsheds for wealthy landowners. In one village near Sumbrial, I stop at a shed where four children, all under 11, squat on dank concrete, filing and sanding scissors on miniature anvils set in the floor. Their clothes are grimy, as are their faces.

Surgical instruments are a big export item for Pakistan--scissors, scalpels, tweezers for suturing. American companies import about \$26 million worth of these instruments annually, although that might change now that the Clinton administration has decided to end special low tariffs on surgical instruments and some carpets imported from Pakistan because of that country's failure to reform its child labor policies. The four boys in the shed say they are paid 60 cents for every dozen scissors they finish.

In another cluster of metalwork shops outside Duska, none of the children has ever been to school. "Would you like to go?" I ask Shakeel, who is eight. "Anji," he says. Yes. But he speaks in a whisper, his head lowered, trying not to anger his boss. "Why can't you go to school?" I ask. He does not answer. I ask him again, gently, and his eyes fill with tears. He scurries back to his anvil

and starts filing rapidly, turning his face away. Yes, it's a different culture, but a child's pain is the same everywhere.

In Wasonpura, a carpetmaking village, I enter a dungeon of a room, long and narrow and nearly airless. The one window is closed against insects. Two pale overhead bulbs provide light to squint by. Sounds of sniffing and coughing fill the shed. The boys are thin and bent from squatting at the looms 12 to 13 hours a day, six days a week. Open sewage gutters run past the shed, giving off a stench that draws throngs of flies. The boys shake their heads like horses to dislodge them, as all the while their flying fingers tie knots, cut the yarn after each knot, pound the pattern tight. All of them are bonded workers, illiterate, never having seen the inside of a school. They may have heard reports that bonded labor is illegal, but they are not sure, for their masters have told them this is "propaganda" spread by foreign agents.

Fortunately, the owner is away. His foreman stands to the side, watchful but not interfering. A woman comes into the shed holding a two-year-old. We ask if the child is a future carpet weaver. "No, no," snaps the foreman. "This is my son. He will go to school and study."

The other carpet sheds in the compound are no different, providing the same hopeless scene--children with sad and tired faces, children who are ailing, physically and mentally. A recent U.S. Department of Labor report said of Pakistani carpet children: "Child weavers suffer work-related injuries and illnesses, such as injuries due to sharp instruments, respiratory tract infections and...spinal deformities...as well as physical abuse." It cannot be surprising that many of these captive children die before they reach 20.

The carpets woven in Wasonpura are made, the foreman says, for the Kashmirian export company in Lahore. They are destined for Europe, Japan and the U.S., where they sell for as much as \$2,000. The American showroom is in Atlanta. One bonded child weaver in Wasonpura would have to work nine or 10 years to earn that much money--if he lived that long.

The carpet moguls in Pakistan, who have recently seen their exports drop by more than \$10 million as a result of negative publicity in the West, still refuse to acknowledge that any child labor is involved in their products. At a recent carpet show in Lahore, one speaker for the carpet manufacturers association reportedly told an audience that any pictures or television footage that purported to show Pakistani children making carpets were hoaxes aimed at embarrassing Pakistan and were probably filmed in India.

Unlike the Pakistani carpet barons, the Western multinationals and importers that capitalize on child labor admit it exists but say it's caused by deep and all-but-intractable poverty and that it would be a mistake to change things in a hurry. I think my understanding of child labor and its deep roots is about as clear as that of most American corporations. I observed it up close when I was posted in India for three years in the 1970s as a correspondent for The New York Times. What I learned then, and again now, was that to accept the system as immutable is to make it immutable. Boycotts and trade embargoes may not be a solution (though often they have a way of getting the attention of intransigent governments), but doing nothing or next to nothing is an antisolution.

"We used to just say it was a poverty problem," says Rolfe Carriere, UNICEF's representative in

Bangladesh. "Our own resignation has accommodated the persistence of child labor for a long time."

One antidote to child labor is education. The most effective human rights organization in Pakistan, the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF), has opened 240 free primary schools for poor children, among them many of the 30,000 bonded workers the group has freed over the past eight years. Its success has made it a hated target of the government, which harasses its workers and files false criminal charges against them. Citing the threat of terrorism, police even raided BLLF's offices with weapons drawn, carrying off everything but the desks and chairs.

At one BLLF school northwest of Lahore, 67 students are learning reading and geography, as well as receiving instruction in self-reliance. One of the two teachers, Salma Riaz, 20, was herself a subjugated carpet worker who started weaving at the age of five. Several of the children in her classes are freed workers. Afzal Fazal is only 10, but he worked five years at a carpet loom before his release. "I was beaten by the masters," he says in a small voice. "Whenever I made a wrong knot, they hit me with their shoes."

Nearly everyone who has studied the problem sees education as the critical starting point. While the governments of child-labor countries accuse outside critics of moralizing, the evidence shows that their failure to provide enough schools is based not on strapped financial conditions but on conscious choices to serve business and the military, rather than the poor and powerless. Experts say few nations in the world today are too poor to provide free education to their children--and these do not include Pakistan, which spends 38 percent of its budget on defense and only 3 percent on education and health combined. A focus on primary education, international studies have found, is the common ingredient in the success of Asia's fastest-growing economies, such as South Korea's. In short, schools are good business.

Why, then, aren't Western corporations that earn their profits in poor countries talking about schools? Possibly because it might cost them some money. Back home, the same multinationals demonstrate their commitment to the communities where they have their headquarters and factories by spending money to upgrade schools and ghetto housing. But with a handful of exceptions, such as Levi Strauss and Gillette, these companies have no budgets for their "out-sourced" communities in the third world.

In India the vistas of child labor are much the same: eight-year-olds pushing wheelbarrows of heavy clay across brickyards; four-year-olds stitching soccer balls with needles longer than their fingers; fragile-looking girls carrying baskets of dung on their heads; little boys hacking up sputum as they squat before their looms, trying to do good enough work to avoid the masters' blows. All this takes place against a backdrop of rising affluence enjoyed by the privileged classes--lavish villas with high walls topped by iron spikes and satellite dishes on the roofs, luxury cars driven by liveried chauffeurs.

Although India's commitment to democracy--with its free press and readily accessible information on child labor--remains stronger than Pakistan's, its leadership and intelligentsia are almost as bitterly resentful of outside criticism. Not long ago, a conference of third world countries held in New Delhi issued a resolution condemning any attempt by the West to boycott products made by

child workers. Said an Indian spokesman: "Trying to solve the problem of child labor in the name of doing some good for children would only put them into more difficulties. It is not a simple problem that can be solved overnight. We will do it on our own, that's all."

India, like Pakistan, has a national human rights group crusading against child labor--the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude. It is led by Kailash Satyarthi, 42, a gifted, vibrant Brahmin. Since 1980, he and his colleagues have freed more than 29,000 children. They have done this through legal action and surprise rescue raids. Kailash lost two friends in the struggle. One was beaten to death, he says, the other shot by thugs working for stone quarry owners.

With a guide from Kailash's group, I set out for Jullundur, a mushrooming industrial city northwest of Delhi. The workers' slum there is an overpopulated hive of mud-and-brick shanties, where clots of boys and girls seem to be on every stoop and rope bed doing subcontracted work--stitching low-quality soccer balls, cutting out shower clogs, sewing cheap sports gloves, gluing badminton shuttlecocks. Some call this cottage industry; it's more like hovel industry.

In one shanty, not much bigger than a prison cell, a three-year-old named Silgi sits on the mud floor in a filthy dress. Her stitching seems more than adequate, but her hands are so tiny she can't handle the scissors to cut the thread. An older sister does it for her. Later, a boss at a nearby soccer factory says some of the balls, bearing the brand name Super, are being shipped to Los Angeles.

Kailash's group also believes in the power of education. At his ashram on the outskirts of New Delhi, 57 liberated boys, the latest class, are spending three months learning how to rid themselves of their slavery syndrome--the sense of low caste that made them afraid of everyone they considered above them. They are given basic literacy lessons, social education and training in carpentry and tailoring.

Some of the stories in the ashram are chilling. Aghan, a carpet boy, has a mutilated face. His master branded his right cheek with a glowing iron rod, then inserted a toxin that blinded his left eye when Aghan pleaded to go home to see his mother. The torture was inflicted after two years in the thrall of this master at a loom near Benares. Aghan was rescued in a raid in January. Now 12, he knows he is hard to look at and that his life, no matter how free, will never be easy. Of the carpet master, he says: "After he branded me and I was screaming and crying, he said, 'If you ever remember your family again and ask to go home, I will kill you.'"

Most of the boys in the ashram have come out of the carpet industry, where 300,000 like them are in bondage. Middlemen pocket \$100 for each boy they bring in. Carpets are a multibillion-dollar industry in India, generating huge exports to Europe and the U.S. Most experts agree that the industry would collapse without child labor.

A few days after my visit, Kailash flies to Mirzapur, near Benares, to stage another rescue. He finally persuades a reluctant magistrate to sign the paper for a police escort, but the loom owner manages to thwart the raid; only three boys are liberated. Along on the raid is Paras Ram, whose son Dinesh was kidnapped by a carpet middleman two years ago when the boy was six. Since then, the father, a farm laborer from a village 600 miles away, had been trying to get news of the

boy. He has saved every penny to make this trip.

After the first raid, the father is frantic: Dinesh is not one of those rescued. But the next day, Kailash and fellow activists mount a second raid, this time freeing eight boys. Dinesh is among them. Paras Ram holds tight to his son, weeping. The boy, stunned and quiet at first, finally tells his father how he was beaten regularly by the loom owner and slashed on his foot when he cried for his parents. He and the others were fed once a day, he says, and were never paid. As the afternoon turns to dusk, Dinesh realizes he is truly free. He looks around him and says he feels like the fields after a restoring rain. "Shareer aur aatma hari hogaya," he murmurs in Hindi. My body and soul are green again.

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By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG with additional reporting by Jimmie Briggs

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## *Ship Breaker* by Paolo Bacigalupi- Child Labor (article 2 of 2)

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#### GOAL: ENDING CHILD LABOR

##### **The campaign to stop the mistreatment of kids turns up the heat and gets results**

CAREFULLY GUIDING A NEEDLE that's longer than his tiny fingers, a young boy stitches together the leather pieces of a soccer ball. He sits crouched in the corner of a hot, airless shed for 12 hours. For his long day's work, he will earn 60 cents.

The boy is one of more than 200 million children who work at hard, sometimes dangerous jobs all over the world. Child labor exists in two-thirds of the world's nations. From Indonesia to Guatemala, poor children as young as 6 are sent off to work. Often they are mistreated and punished for not working hard enough. Children mix the gunpowder for firecrackers in China and knot the threads for carpets in India--all for pennies a day. Sometimes they are sold as slaves.

In Pakistan, where 80% of the world's soccer balls are made, the situation is especially bad. There are 11 million to 12 million working children in that Asian country. At least half of them will die of starvation or disease before they reach their 12th birthday.

This month a campaign to stop child-labor abuse paid off. FIFA, the soccer world's governing organization, announced it was taking a stand. FIFA's seal of approval appears on soccer balls. The seal guarantees the balls are the correct weight and size. But from now on, the FIFA stamp will also guarantee the balls are made under proper working conditions. FIFA's decision, says U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, "is a major step in eliminating child labor from the soccer-ball industry."

#### KIDS HELPING KIDS

Reich thanked the public for FIFA's decision. "You turned up the heat, and you got results," he said in a speech last week to the Child Labor Coalition, an organization that is trying to end the abuse of young workers. Reich also congratulated Craig Kielburger, 13, of Canada.

For the past year, Craig has traveled the world fighting for kids' rights. "I don't play a lot of soccer," says Craig, "but I have many friends who do. This change is important to them. It is just the beginning. But a strong beginning."

Craig believes kids can make a difference. He has this advice for TFK's readers: "Write letters to companies and government officials. Put pressure on leaders to make changes and to stop the misuse of children."

## A U.S. PROBLEM TOO

The mistreatment of child workers is not just a foreign problem. Since colonial times, the U.S. has counted on children to lend a helping hand in its fields and factories. In the 1800s children as young as 7 worked in textile mills for 12 hours a day. Bad behavior sent a child straight to the "whipping room" for punishment.

In 1938 a federal law was passed that set child-labor guidelines, limiting work hours for kids and requiring safe conditions. The law still exists, but it is sometimes ignored. For instance, close to 1 million kids in the U. S. work for farmers. From sunup to sundown, they harvest and haul. Many of these children are illegal immigrants. Other kids work near dangerous machinery or in other hazardous conditions.

One solution to the child-labor problem in poor countries is education. "The future of these countries," Secretary Reich told TFK, "depends on a work force that is educated. We are prepared to help build schools."

Education is helping to make the world a brighter place for 12-year-old Aghan of India. When he was 9, Aghan was kidnapped from his home and sold to a carpet maker. Aghan's boss was very cruel. "I was always crying for my mother," he recalls. Aghan's dream was to learn to write so that he could send letters to his parents. Earlier this year, Aghan was rescued from the factory by a group that opposes child labor. Today he is living in a shelter in New Delhi and is hard at work-learning to write.

**PHOTOS (COLOR):** All work and no play: A boy stitches soccer balls in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, children break bricks into little pieces, which will be used in the construction industry.

## WHERE CHILDREN ARE HARD AT WORK

### MEXICO

Making clothing

Making sports equipment

Making toys

Making furniture

### GUATEMALA

Making clothing

### COLOMBIA

Picking flowers

## BRAZIL

Making clothing

Making shoes

Mining

## PORTUGAL

Making clothing

Making shoes

## MOROCCO

Making clothing

Making carpets

## IVORY COAST

Mining

## ZIMBABWE

Mining

## LESOTHO

Making clothing

## EGYPT

Making carpets

## PAKISTAN

Making sports equipment

Making carpets

## INDIA

Making clothing

Making shoes

Making fireworks

Making carpets

Polishing gemstones

## NEPAL

Making carpets

## CHINA

Making clothing

Making sports equipment

Making toys

Making fireworks

## BANGLADESH

Making clothing

## PHILIPPINES

Making clothing

## THAILAND

Making clothing

Polishing gemstones

Making furniture

## INDONESIA

Making clothing

Making shoes

Making furniture

## TIME FOR KIDS Chart

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